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Title: Drumming out Oppression, or Drumming it in? Identity, Culture and Contention in Dalit Politics.

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Drumming out Oppression, or Drumming it in? Identity, Culture and Contention in Dalit Politics.

Abstract: In the past decade there have been an increasing number of academic articles on the Dalit drum, or *parai*. For the most part they note the processes by which this one humiliating caste service has been re-symbolised as an art-form and has become central to Dalit struggles for liberation. In such articles there is an easy assumption that the *parai* is an art which Dalits can take pride in. In this paper I problematize such claims by pointing to dissenting voices and campaigns by those who claim that the celebration of the drum merely perpetuates degradation. This raises questions of who speaks for a community, whether a symbol of oppression can truly become an icon of resistance, and how marginalised communities can construct positive identities when their cultural memories and practices are inescapably associated with their subordination.

Keywords: Dalit; Caste; Stigma; Identity; Drumming

Introduction: Art or Service?

The *parai* or *thappu* is a one-sided, circular drum usually made from calfskin stretched over a wooden frame. This resonant percussion implement is one of the most recognisable and striking instruments in south India, and is often to be seen and heard accompanying social and political processions, funeral corteges, and on the stages of cultural festivals. As the drum is manufactured from the hide of a dead cow it is deemed to be polluting (Arun 2007a).¹ Since it was played for funerals or to drive away evil spirits its music is regarded as inauspicious even though it is also played on happier occasions (McGilvray 1983). As a consequence the *parai* is a potent symbol of impurity that is etymologically linked to the Paraiyars – the untouchable

caste most closely associated with the drum – and also to the English term Pariah. Despite this, it is worth stressing that not all Paraiyars played the drum and other Dalit castes both did and do play the *parai* on occasion. Such drumming – unlike that performed on goat hide drums in classical music - was not regarded as a skill or art-form but as a caste-based *tholil* (service) (Arun 2007a). Performers would often be paid in kind, if at all, and had no option but to play if summoned by local landlords. Significantly, McGilvray (1983) notes how these performances validated the status of the upper-castes since the Paraiyars were prohibited from drumming at their own caste funerals. For much of the 20th Century, therefore, those at the foot of the caste hierarchy seeking social change, mobilised against caste tasks and abandoned the stigmatised *parai*. Towards the millennium, however, there was a shift in strategy towards a celebration of Dalit drumming that entailed a re-signification of the *parai* and an inversion of stigma.

In numerous arts festivals now, the *parai* is valorised as an ancient folk-art and has become a symbol of rebellion against a caste order which denigrated the arts and skills of the lower castes. Those who used to be called untouchables and are officially referred to as Scheduled Castes – by reference to the schedule or list of castes entitled to affirmative action – now call themselves Dalits. Dalit means downtrodden or broken, but has been adopted by activists in a spirit of pride and militancy in their campaigns against caste discrimination, even though its usage in everyday language is variable. These campaigns have entailed challenging caste practices head-on, refusing to perform traditional caste tasks, engaging in politics and contesting the dominant cultural norms of Indian society (Gorringe 2005). Central to this last strategy has been the assertion that ‘Dalit arts are weapons for Dalit liberation.’² The aim of Dalit Arts Festivals and campaigns, according to the Dalit Resource Centre (DRC) in Madurai, is to gain

status and recognition for previously stigmatised art forms and to challenge the association between the *parai* and untouchability³.

At the heart of both processes – those to abandon or to celebrate the *parai* are issues of cultural identity and the thorny question of how previously marginalised groups can forge a distinctive and positive cultural identity. Given the significance of the drum, it should come as no surprise that the instrument is symbolically central to debates over Dalit identity, and Paraiyar identity in particular. In his work on drummers in Sri Lanka, McGilvray (1983: 101) noted that ‘the Paraiyars themselves naturally take pride in the honor accorded to their caste symbol, particularly as it reinforces their generalized caste function as musicians rather than their specifically degraded role as funeral servants’. McGilvray, however, recognises the contentious nature of this potent caste symbol when he moves from a traditional hamlet to an independent Paraiyar settlement. Here, he observes, few Paraiyar men ‘still engage in drumming of any sort, and the younger generation shows little interest in taking up the profession’ (1983: 107). ‘The birth of the modern individual in the humiliated communities’ as Nagaraj (1993: 7-8) argues, involves ‘...a conscious effort to alter one’s past’. Contemporary Dalits’ relationship to the *parai*, thus, are filtered through what Nagaraj (1993) refers to as the ‘cultural memory’ of caste. Their identity strategies, therefore, have to navigate through complex intersections of community, memory and inequality.

A brief example will help illustrate the issues at stake: In February 2015 a group of low-caste folk artistes from Thirupuvanam, Madurai district in central Tamil Nadu, objected to their exclusion from a local temple festival. ‘The caste Hindus’, Kumar (2015) reported, ‘have called artistes from other districts, but local Dalits were not called to perform at their own place’. The article notes how local Dalit musicians had recently stopped performing at funerals in order to

play at weddings and other auspicious occasions. Their subsequent exclusion from the festival at the local village temple which they had helped build, points to ongoing processes of caste negotiation and identity formation. In this case, as elsewhere, the identity of the folk musicians is bound up with music, symbols, caste and culture. The conflict around a temple festival thus offers a snapshot of similar altercations across India as previously stigmatised and subordinated communities struggle to carve out a position for themselves in contemporary India. The story here points to ‘the affective and emotional dimension of caste’ which, as Rao (2009: 484) argues, ‘informs ideals of belonging, defines relationships and circumscribes duties’. Like Rao, I focus here on the performative and constructed dimensions of caste identity. Where Rao (2009) views these processes as distinct from those of hierarchy and power, however, I see them as bound up with such issues. Following Sikka (2012: 44), this paper contends that the identity strategies of subordinate groups are influenced by ‘their awareness of historical relations, especially those involving inequalities of power’. As with other social movements based on identity, aspects of the Dalit movement have sought to invert the stigma attached to their culture and now express pride in their history (Gorringe 2005). Whilst the DRC hails drumming and other Dalit arts as weapons of liberation, however, not all Dalit activists play the same tune. For many, the continued beating of the *parai* perpetuates stigma and humiliation and they bemoan the celebration of a symbol of injustice. Drawing on recent fieldwork in Tamil Nadu this paper will chart the dissonant perspectives of rival activists and offer an analysis of the debates surrounding drumming in Dalit communities before concluding with a reflection on the wider issues of caste and identity that these debates speak to. Whilst there has been some writing in Tamil that puts the counter-perspective, these views receive little coverage in English where the emphasis has been on the drum as a symbol of resistance. At the heart of these debates are the questions of who speaks for a community, and how previously subaltern groups

approach questions of cultural identity. We begin by reviewing the literature on Dalits and drumming in South India before turning to the data and then concluding.

Drumming, Dependency and Dignity

To appreciate the significance of the debate around the *parai* it is necessary to locate drumming within its socio-political context. Drumming, we should note, was one of the distinctive caste-duties or services that Paraiyars or Arunthathiyars (the lowest of the three main Dalit castes in Tamil Nadu) were required to perform for those above them in the caste hierarchy (including other Dalit castes) (Arun 2007a). The tasks included cattle scavenging, acting as funeral servants (announcing deaths and overseeing cremation) and drumming at funerals, and were all seen as polluting (McGilvray 1983, Mosse 1994). Indeed, Deliege (1993) observes that lower caste myths of origin generally accept the notion that activities like drumming, beef-eating and funeral service are polluting. The association between the music of marginalised groups and inauspicious occasions means that ‘the sound of the *parai* instantly signified a death in the village’ (Arun 2007b: 87). Historically, the performers were required to play at funerals and received cooked food and other handouts in return. As seen above, furthermore, Dalits were debarred from performing for themselves. Not surprisingly, therefore, Dalits perceived themselves as subject to ‘enforced servitude’ and dependence ‘rather than impurity’ (Mosse 1994: 82). The beating of drums, as Shah et al (2004: 107) note, ‘was imposed as a social obligation on Dalits’.

Against this backdrop, the *parai* represented subordination and stood out as a marker of untouchable caste status. Brahminical hegemony, Larbeer and Alexandar (2000: xii) argue, ‘forcibly degraded and made our [Dalits’] cultural expressions also untouchable and polluted’. Initially, therefore, socio-political mobilisation by Dalit groups sought to avoid demeaning and

stigmatised tasks. Whilst the abandoning of 'impure' practices and the emulation of upper castes has been described as 'sanskritisation' – the adoption by lower castes of the 'customs, rites and beliefs of the Brahmins' (Srinivas 1956: 481; see McGilvray 1983: 113), Dalit mobilisation stressed the rejection of degrading jobs rather than the emulation of others. Writing in 1943, for example, Ambedkar observes that Dalits 'are fighting against the indignities and injustices which the Hindus in the name of their religion have heaped upon them' (Thorat and Kumar 2008: 248). Earlier, in 1936, his classic work 'Annihilation of Caste' advocated conversion out of Hinduism as a means of escaping untouchability. Here he noted that many occupations in India 'are regarded as degraded by the Hindus [and thus] provoke those who are engaged in them to aversion. There is a constant desire to evade and escape from such occupation' (Ambedkar 2011: 35). The urge to reject past humiliation is captured by Nagaraj's (1993: 74-5) description of his activist friend for whom: 'the art of playing drums is linked with the humiliating task of carrying dead animals... "I want to forget all this," he screamed one night: "I want to forget their gods, their folk epics, their violence'.

For Pandey (2006: 1781), Dalits suffer from a form of internal colonialism that deprives them of an independent history and culture. Ridding themselves of these markers of humiliation, therefore, is essential to their 'struggle for full citizenship' (Pandey 2006: 1786). Abjuring from caste tasks and practices, however, is no easy matter. Economic dependence, socio-political powerlessness and an absence of caste neutral jobs combined with socio-religious indoctrination to perpetuate caste practices. McGilvray's comparative study of two Paraiyar settlements captures this admirably: in the more 'traditional' hamlet where Dalits remain dependent on locally dominant castes, the Paraiyars not only continue to drum but also 'do not yet wear shirts or long waistcloths when interacting with Mukkuvars' (1983: 102). In the independent Paraiyar village, by contrast, hardly any Dalits continue to drum at funerals and

their attire is indistinguishable from that of other castes. In Tamil Nadu, Arun (2007) and Mosse (1994) observe, many Dalits sought to increase their status by converting out of Hinduism. The interplay between power and social status is seen, however, in that even converts often continued to perform the social roles expected of them. Those who refused to perform such tasks faced social ostracism, exclusion from local services and employment, threats and violence (Arun 2007, Gorringe 2005). Nor, despite the de jure prohibition of untouchability in the constitution, could Dalits necessarily turn to the state for protection against locally dominant castes. Pandian (2000) notes how conflicts over drumming between Vanniyars and Paraiyars in Kattumannarkoil district – north Tamil Nadu - in 1985, resulted in police firing against Dalits.

Dalit relations to the *parai*, thus, reflect asymmetries of power and status. McGilvray (1983) links the abandonment of the *parai* with the Paraiyar's independence from dominant castes and desire for middle-class respectability. In his analysis of Dalit movements and cultural memory in Karnataka, Nagaraj (1993, 1994) similarly describes how an urban Dalit elite insists on the cultural rejection of Hinduism and the symbols and practices associated with untouchability. Shah et al (2004: 111) note that drum-beating continues to be a caste task across much of rural India, highlighting the extent to which it is entrenched within social relations and rituals. Lacking alternatives and in the face of unrelenting opposition Dalits have been compelled to bargain with casteism.⁴ Rather than abandoning drumming, for instance, Dalits have tried to alter the status of their performance by removing the most obvious markers of low status and inferiority. Paraiyars, thus, demand payment for their services and expect to be treated with respect (eg. Be *asked* to perform, rather than compelled) (McGilvray 1983: 109, Mosse 1994: 87). More commonly, as in the dispute in Thirupuvanam discussed above, Dalit drummers refuse to perform at funerals and focus on wedding and other events instead (Kumar 2015,

Lillelund 2009). Clark-Deces, similarly, notes how younger Paraiyars either refused to perform such tasks and were embarrassed that their elders continued to do so, or they formed professional and westernised marching ‘bands’ that were totally removed from the unkempt and ‘burlesque routines’ of the older drummers (2006: 266). In so doing, she notes, the Dalits altered the way that funerals occur so as to showcase their ‘new “touchable” experience and identity’ and ‘displayed their aspirations and recent achievements’ (Clark-Deces 2006: 266). Others organised themselves into unions so as to be able to drive harder bargains and secure other benefits⁵, or negotiated with other castes and local authorities to create government posts with monthly salaries for a few professional drummers and scavengers (Shah et al. 2004: 113).

Rao, Viswanathan and Subramaniam (1995) note how the attempts to escape from caste subjugation engendered bitter conflicts and disputes between Dalits and castes placed higher in the hierarchy. The SOCO Trust (1997) report into the caste clashes that flared up in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu in the mid-1990s, argued that the Dalit refusal to perform menial jobs was one significant trigger for the clashes. As recently as May 2000, dominant castes ransacked Dalit homes, hospitalised thirty Dalits and injured many more in the village of Themmavur in central Tamil Nadu following their refusal to play drums at festivals or funerals.⁶ Harriss (2006) likewise notes that Dalits in Pudukottai, central Tamil Nadu, were attacked following their refusal to drum at a village festival. Whilst relations of dependence and overt expressions of caste duty are declining, the continued requirement to play the drum as a caste duty is seen in the reactions of higher castes to attempts by Dalits to escape from humiliation (cf. Lillelund 2009). Even where the compulsion is economic rather than social, Dalit bands end up having to play at funerals. As Tamizh Murasu, an activist living near Allanganallur in Madurai district put it: ‘You know the Parai Groups that they have? They have them in Allanganallur, Vadipatti, Madurai and many places. [Author: Yes]. It is only for

funerals that they are calling these groups' (Interview, April 2012). Sustained campaigns *against* the compulsion to play the *parai* at funerals are a far cry from its celebration as a 'weapon of liberation'. That such debates over caste and untouchability should still be occurring in Tamil Nadu despite its history of anti-caste activism may be perplexing for some. Before proceeding, therefore, it is worth briefly reflecting on the interplay between Dravidian politics and caste.⁷

Drumming and Dravidianism

Any analysis of socio-political identity in Tamil Nadu today is incomplete without reference to the non-Brahmin and Dravidian movements and parties that emerged from them. Dravidian parties have not only held power in the state since 1967, they have shaped the socio-political culture of Tamil Nadu (Geetha and Rajadurai 1998; Bate 2009). The *Dravida Kazhagam* (DK - Dravidian Federation) led by E. V. Ramasami or Periyar (esteemed one) articulated a vehement and radical critique of Hindu orthodoxy and brahminism. A key plank of this critique was the assertion that Hinduism was responsible for the subordination and humiliation of Dalits (Geetha and Rajadurai 1998). Both the Self-Respect Movement and the DK sought to present a vision of an egalitarian Tamil or Dravidian past that had been corrupted by Aryan customs. The Justice leader Soundrapandian, thus, argued that 'untouchability, unapproachability, unseeability and other monstrous customs were unknown to our ancients' (cited in Barnett 1976: 44). Whilst initially attracted to the radicalism of the Self-Respect Movement and the DK, however, Dalit leaders and activists became increasingly disillusioned by their continued exclusion from positions of leadership (Barnett 1976: 41), and the failure of these movements to address deep-seated social inequalities and forms of stigmatisation (Geetha and Rajadurai 1998).

Although Periyar sought to combat the stigma attached to Dalits by calling *parai* drumming an art too, therefore, this top-down re-symbolisation was rejected by Dalits at the time (Veeramal 2012). Veeramal was active in the Dalit and Dravidian movements and founded educational and welfare associations for Dalits and women in the 1940s and 1950s. ‘Does anyone learn this art from a guru?’ she asked. ‘Does anyone pay to be taught this? Who gives this the status of an art and organizes concerts? This is a hereditary work of a particular community’ (2012: 194). As Barnett notes in her insightful analysis, ‘even in its most radical days, the Dravidian movement did not come to grips with the reactionary potential of an analysis of cultural oppression without strong economic content’ (1976: 262). The result, as Geetha and Rajadurai (1993: 131) observe, is that ‘land relations and relationships of production in the Tamil countryside continue to be informed by the political economy of caste’. Consequently, Bate (2009: 37) points out, Dravidian hegemony has ‘served to protect the position of (non-Brahmin) privileged castes and classes’.

Dalit leaders have been scathing in their criticism of Dravidianism. Ravikumar (2006), General Secretary of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi* (Liberation Panther Party), the largest Dalit movement in the state, insists that in ‘matters relating to untouchables ... his [Periyar’s] attempts remained at the level of rhetoric’. Dr Satyavani Muthu, one of the foremost Dalit leaders and founder-members of the *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (Dravidian Progressive Federation) – the party that emerged from the DK – was ousted from her position in the 1970s. Reflecting on her own career she advised that Dalits ‘should not take things for granted. They should not trust the governments of the day which are dominated by the upper classes and their interests. They should become militant and organise a powerful movement’ (in Barnett 1976: 299). Anandhi (1995: 59) similarly points to a failure of Dravidianism to provide a positive identity to Dalits. In her work she notes how Dalits were drawn to

Hindutva movements to combat their marginalisation. Whilst neglecting Dalits, however, the non-Brahmin movement had emphasised the importance of self-respect for a caste or community (Geetha and Rajadurai 1998), and this served as a template for successive challengers to Dravidian hegemony. The 1980s, thus, witnessed the rise of Dalit movements across Tamil Nadu and ‘the Ambedkar centenary celebrations in the 1990s led to the consolidation of these forces and created a space for their cultural expression’ (Ravikumar 2012: xxxi). Significantly, Ravikumar notes, the rise of Dalit assertion found cultural expression in literature and art in ways that transcended the ‘discourse of victimisation’ (ibid. xxxii). This paved the way for Dalit activists and movements to challenge the cultural codes that devalue the art of the *parai* and those who play it and articulate a more militant identity.

Drumming Out Oppression? Challenging Cultural Codes

The re-signification of Dalit drumming occurred in stages. At first, movements against caste discrimination sought to challenge their lowly status through sanskritisation – the adoption of upper caste practices and values – or through the rejection of tasks perceived to be polluting (McGlvray 1983; Arun 2007a). Zelliott (1996: 293) traces a change in approach to 1956 and the mass conversion of Dalits led by Ambedkar to Buddhism in Maharashtra. With the rejection of Hinduism and the assertion of self-respect and self-worth, there was an effort to ‘repossess culture and self; to work out independent Dalit values and standards through independent cultural institutions’ (Joshi 1986: 78). In part inspired by the Civil Rights Movement in the US, the cultural aspects of the Dalit struggle were to the fore in the 1970s with an outpouring of Dalit literature, poetry and performing arts underpinned by what Zelliott (1996) calls ‘the folklore of pride’. This apt phrase captures the contention that Dalits ‘have and have had a culture of their own, in no way inferior to anyone else’s tradition’ (1996: 318).

The ripples of this cultural movement were soon evident in Tamil Nadu. Indeed, they had been pre-figured to some extent in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries by the work of Ayothidas Pandithar – a well-known Dalit intellectual who published *Oru Paisa Tamizhan* (One Pence Tamilian) and later *Tamizhan*. He rejected Hindu teachings and argued that Dalits were originally Buddhists (Balasubramaniam 2013, Geetha and Rajaduri 1998). The possibilities for an alternate reading of Dalit lives and experiences, thus, was already in existence. With the emergence of radical Dalit movements from the 1980s, Dalit activists in Tamil Nadu have challenged the perception that practices associated with Dalits are shameful (Clarke 1998). In the mid-1980s, for instance, Reverend Appavoo (1986) – better known as Parattai – argued that folklore and culture were carriers of change. His song, Good News (*Nalla Seydi*) captures the spirit of his challenge to caste norms when he describes the *parai* as a *porparai* (War Drum) and exhorts them to:

Fear not! Fear Not! Oh Dalit people!

Only you have the war drum to drive your fear away. (In Sherinian 2014: xiii).

Simultaneously, other Dalit activists were articulating similar issues. As Raj Gauthaman, one of the most prominent Dalit intellectuals and cultural critics put it:

One dimension of Dalit protest culture is to bring about an inversion. It should attack the “sacred” and prestigious cultural symbols that help Brahminical Hindu culture in retaining its hegemonic hold (2012: 267).

At the forefront of these attempts to re-imagine and revalue Dalits arts, as Arun (2007a, 2007b) and Ravikumar (2012) note, are the Dalit Cultural Festivals (*kalai vizhakkal*) which celebrate

previously demeaned cultural practices as arts and re-cast Dalit drumming ‘as a sophisticated musical form comparable to classical music’ (Arun 2007b: 99). The organisers of these events set out to challenge Brahminical hegemony and the forced degrading of particular cultural expressions (Larbeer and Alexandar 2000). Writing about the appropriation of *bhakti* forms of worship by Buddhist converts in north India, Gokhale-Turner (1981: 39) notes how it ‘is now to be used to destroy that very tradition within which it was moored, and to create a new culture in many ways antithetical to the old’. In like manner, Sherinian (2014: 13) notes, ‘the *parai* drummer has become the icon of the Tamil Dalit liberation movement’, and Arun (2007b: 103) argues that the re-signification of the drum not only aids self-respect and assertion but also challenges the ‘structural logic and legitimacy’ of the caste system. Arun (2007a: 284-5) goes on to argue that, in rejecting dominant codes, inverting the stigma attached to key symbols and building their identity on these ‘transformed symbols’ the Paraiyars have broken with sanskritisation and the hierarchy of caste.

Indeed, since the rise of Dalit movements in the 1980s, there are signs that the *parai* is finding greater acceptance. Following several films (such as *Sivappu Malli* – Red Jasmine – 1981, Ramanarayan) in which the *parai* was wielded by activists, in 1999 the Tamil hit film *Sangamam* (Fusion, Suresh Krishna) revolved around a competition between classical and folk arts and featured a troupe of *parai* artistes. In 2003, the film *Thendral* (Breeze, Thangar Bachan, 2003) included a song that praised the ‘liberation music’ of the *parai*.⁸ In 2001, musicians Garth Hewitt and Paul Field teamed up with Christian Aid to produce an album called *The Dalit Drum*⁹ which took the music of the *parai* to a global audience and celebrated it as an ancient folk art. The Dalit Resource Centre (DRC) motif is three Dalit drummers, and the pulsating rhythms of the Dalit drums were said to have captured the attention and imagination of delegates at the World Conference Against Racism in 2001.¹⁰ The changing

status of the drum has been document in academic research, with numerous studies highlighting the process by which the drum is now valorised (Arun 2007a, 2007b; Clark-Deces 2006; Sherinian 2007). As Rajasekaran and Blake Willis (2003: 71) put it: ‘The *Thappu* [or *parai*] has undergone a metamorphosis from being a caste and local symbol to one of the liberation and assertion of the Dalit community, *the drum of liberation*’ (emphasis in original). The *parai*, however, is inescapably linked to its past and not everyone is happy to identify with it.

Dissent, Drumming and Difference

Eyerman and Jamison (1998: 7) note how rituals centred on musical performance can help to reconstitute culture and politics. They point out that music can foster collective identity and aid forms of mobilisation. Their central argument is that social movements are central to processes of *cultural* transformation (1998: 10). Protest music, such as Dalit drumming, thus, ‘should be viewed as a form of political persuasion’ (Mondak 1988: 25) that contests hegemonic cultural norms. In this sense, as Melucci (1996: 357) argues, protest music can help activists to escape ‘predominant forms of representation’ and exercise their own agency. In a similar vein, Frith (1996: 121) argues that ‘music symbolises and offers the immediate experience of collective identity’, but he suggests that it points towards enduring structures too in the sense that ‘somebody else has set up the conventions; they are clearly social and clearly apart from us’. Thus it is, as Roy and Dowd (2010: 194) observe, that the music of marginalised groups is often devalued and marginalised.

Indeed, part of the reason why music is so powerful an aspect of identity, is that the values assigned to musical performances and genres map onto social distinctions (Roy and Dowd 2010). Writing in a Tamil context, Sherinian (2007: 255) notes that the established ‘rhetoric of musical value reveals the local dynamics of caste hegemony’. Time and again Dalit activists

would point to the imbalance between brahminical ‘high culture’ and their own folk arts (Gorringe 2008). Indeed, as Subramanian’s (2007) work on the *Tamil Isai Iyakkam* (Tamil Music Movement) of the 1940s makes clear, its challenge to the classical musical traditions focused solely on the importance of language in music and did not even consider expanding the parameters of ‘music’ to include folk arts. It was for this reason that Appavoo ‘advocated that folk music in spoken Tamil is the most successful and only possible musical vehicle for an anti-caste, class-conscious liberation theology in South India’ (Sherinian 2007: 268). As Blee’s (2002: 165) work shows, however, members of a movement may disagree about what cultural forms to adopt and ‘the question of music can provoke especially hot disputes’. This should not be surprising given Bourdieu’s (1984: 18) assertion that ‘nothing more clearly affirms one’s “class”, nothing more infallibly classifies, than tastes in music’.

Music, this reminds us, is embedded in social life and is always subject to multiple interpretations. Roy and Dowd (2010: 189) note how contextually situated individuals and groups derive different meanings from the same sounds. This should compel us to question the suggestion that there is ‘a’ soundtrack to the Dalit struggle. Whilst Ramachandran and Hashim (2014: 252) argue that Dalits should ‘quash the stigma that is attached to their identity, and reclaim pride in their ethnic roots’, Brubaker (2002: 164) cautions against ‘groupism’ or ‘the tendency to treat ethnic groups, nations, and races as substantial entities to which interests and agency can be attributed’. His central argument is that ‘we should not uncritically adopt *categories of ethnopolitical practice* as our *categories of social analysis*’ (Brubaker 2002: 166, emphasis in original). Being attuned to ‘negative’ cases can help us as analysts avoid attributing the actions of a few to a larger group and can, as Laitin (1995) notes, alert us to intra-group sanctions, monitoring and policing. They can also highlight intra-‘group’ differentiation that may be glossed over by activists.

During the 2012 version of the *Dalit Kalai Vizha* in Madurai, *parai* artists blocked traffic outside the venue and drew a crowd with their rhythmic beats before leading a dancing procession towards the stage. The whistles, active engagement and rapt attention of the audience suggested that they felt a connection with the music and message of the event. Squabbles over who got to perform when, how media representatives were received and the lack of key note speakers, however, punctured the appearance of unproblematic unity (Fieldnotes, March 2012). Writing in *The Hindu* the following day, Karthikeyan (2012) reported that the event ‘lacked zest’ and had become ritualistic.¹¹ Whilst both Karthikeyan and his respondents saw the festival as playing a critical role in raising consciousness amongst Dalits and combatting their marginality, the evidence of disputes and questions surrounding the event raised the prospect of alternate readings of the cultural repertoire represented on such occasions. ‘Political decisions’, as Mondak (1988: 25) states, ‘inevitably breed opposition’, and the elevation of the *parai* from a symbol of pollution to a marker of identity and distinction is nothing if not political. It is to the debates around the cultural politics of contention that we now turn, but first a brief note on the methods underpinning this research.

Methods: Listening for Difference

The research reported here is part of a larger project investigating the impact and reach of Dalit political engagement in Tamil Nadu, through ethnographic research over a ten month period in 2012 focused on Madurai District, central Tamil Nadu. The research involved participation at socio-cultural events, meetings and rallies; formal interviews with over 60 people in both rural and urban Tamil Nadu that were recorded and transcribed; a further 60 less formal interviews that were not recorded but fed into field notes; and innumerable conversations and interactions as well as an analysis of media reports and secondary literature housed in the Dalit Resource

Centre. Whilst music was not central to my research, Dalit cultural festivals are prominent arenas for the performance of Dalit protest and I attended several during fieldwork. The fact that one of these was billed as a ‘Dalit’ festival, one as an ‘Arunthathiyar’ (the lowest of the main Dalit castes in Tamil Nadu) event and one as a ‘Tamil’ occasion – even though they celebrated similar art forms and cultural repertoires – suggests a fracturing of identity on the one hand and the increasing attraction of the *parai* on the other. This paper, however, was especially inspired by interactions with ‘X-Ray’ Manickam, a veteran of the Dalit movement in the state. Though not affiliated to any one group he is well-known for his interventions in the cultural sphere, particularly through his writing. He was initially involved in a number of small-scale magazines such as *Erimalai* (Volcano), and *Civil Urimai* (Civil Rights) that were circulated amongst Dalit activists. Since then he has written as a freelance correspondent for *Ezhuchi* (Uprising) – the Tamil organ of the Republican Party of India, *Dalit Murasu* (Dalit Drum) and numerous others. I interviewed him to gain a longer-term perspective on the Dalit struggle in Tamil Nadu and the benefits of a bottom-up, data-driven approach were illustrated when he brought up the issue of drumming and introduced me to debates that are absent from recent celebrations of the *parai*. I subsequently introduced this topic into interviews and observations in ways that complicated my initial views on the drum and its interplay with Dalit identity.

‘How can we call this an art?’

I met X-Ray – so called by friends for the depth of his insight – at his home in a remote hamlet and began by asking him about how he became involved in Dalit politics. He immediately replied that he neither liked nor used the term ‘Dalit’. He insisted that Ambedkar had come up with ‘Scheduled Caste’ as ‘a universal name for people across India that was not related to any particular caste. That is the only reason why I use this term’. I pointed out that

this excluded converts to Christianity and Islam, to which his response was that ‘whoever has converted to a different religion should stress that’. He insisted that conversion was meant to help people to escape caste, and calling yourself Dalit ‘means you are still continuing as untouchable people! ... It is better to say you are a Christian, Buddhist, Sikh – that will give you some value’ (Interview, May 2012). He went on to describe his campaigns against menial jobs – especially manual scavenging - in the Community Humiliation Eradication Front alongside former Union Minister Dalit Ezhilmalai in the 1980s, but observed that people were continuing to perform menial jobs across Tamil Nadu. When I asked if Dalits were now paid for their labour, he responded that this was the case but that it simply perpetuated such jobs. Rajangam (Personal Communication, June 2012) had a similar view and questioned the motives of those paying for drummers:

Why do they [other castes] pay such money and look for drum troupes to perform? So that they do not have to do it. What are they getting people to drum for? Do the caste Hindus see them and pay them as artists? No, they are called to fulfil ritual obligations that is all. Then how can we call this an art?

Going further still, X-Ray opined that ‘it is better to beg’. He condemned the silence of current Dalit movements and parties on this issue: ‘As a party what is your agenda? Still we are doing menial jobs and you claim to be a leader?’ (Interview, May 2012).

I had recently been at a public meeting where Thirumavalavan MP, leader of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi*, had been vociferous in his condemnation of manual scavenging in the railways (Fieldnotes, April 2012). ‘They will say: “do not shovel shit”’, X-Ray replied, ‘but they will never say: “do not beat the *parai* drum”’. Tamil Murasu, who was listening in,

nodded: 'he himself beats the *parai* on stage' he noted (Interview, May 2012). I was perplexed by this charge given that all Tamil parties use *parai* music. An *Arun Tamilar Viduthalai Iyyakkam* (Aruthathiyar Tamil Liberation Movement) event on April 14th 2012 began with a procession led by drummers, the Tamil nationalist *Naam Tamilar Katchi* (We Tamils Party) used drummers, Pallar dominated events like the celebration of Immanuel Sekaran – an anti-caste leader on the 1950s - involve the *parai*, and the VCK celebrated the drums both in events and in odes to the leader.¹² I was also familiar with the *Kalai Vizhas* and the argument that this was a neglected art. 'This is indeed an art', X-Ray confirmed, 'it is an ancient and well established art. This is what is said! But saying that, why does nobody else play it? ... Except for the SC communities all other communities avoid it' (Interview, May 2012).

This was the crux of his argument. For all the celebration of the *parai* and its valorisation as a 'war drum' and 'icon of resistance', it was still irrevocably associated with lower castes. I suggested that calling it an art would increase the respect for its performers. 'Respect?' X-Ray spluttered, 'We have been doing this continuously as slaves; they still force us to play'. What is worse, he continued, is that Christian institutions are:

getting Christian Dalits who have escaped servitude to take up the *parai* again! Next thing you know they will be beating drums at funerals and temples too. People have been killed – shot dead during protests, or had their fingers cuts off for refusing to play the *parai* and now they come along and call it an art! It makes my blood boil to think about it (Interview, May 2012).

X-Ray was not alone in his judgement. Other respondents echoed similar perspectives. Arun Muthu, from Kattumanarkovil, for example, argued that the recent celebration of the *parai* went against decades of struggles to eradicate it (Personal Communication, June 2012). In 2007, X-Ray, Stalin Rajangam and Poovizhiyan (both Dalit intellectuals) used work by Ravikumar – VCK Member of the Legislative Assembly between 2006-2011 – to co-author a treatise against the popularisation of the *parai*. In his chapter Ravikumar noted how he was the one who introduced drumming to political events in Pondicherry before having a change of heart following a visit to the statue of John Pandian who was killed in police firing (cf. Pandian 2000). The book is called *Paraiyoli Paravum Izhivu* (The sound of the *parai* diffuses degradation). What the title evokes, X-Ray explained, ‘is that whenever you hear this music it means that people are still doing this menial job’ (Interview, May 2012). The back cover bears the slogan: ‘Eradicating the *parai* is eradicating caste’:

R: Efforts like the *Kalai Vizha* and the use of drums by the VCK and others simply serve to reinforce those links between particular castes and drumming. What is the eradication of caste? The opportunity to choose what you want to do in life.

Author: But what if people *decide* that they want to drum?

R: That is fine, but who is doing the choosing? Those who have been drummers from the outset are still drumming (Rajangam, Personal Communication June 2012).

Tamil Murasu, likewise, argued that ‘those playing drums are all Paraiyars and Chakkiliyars’ and insisted that all the drum teams in villages around Madurai played at funerals. He added that: ‘it is because you are there that they call you isn’t it?’ Conversely, he noted that ‘no Pallars’ – the Dalit caste who are the most socio-politically developed in the state – ‘play drums anymore’ (Tamil Murasu, Interview, May 2012). This points to intra-Dalit differences

in mobilisation, with the better organised and slightly higher-status Pallars often denying that they are Dalits and pointing to a kingly past (Karthikeyan, Rajangam and Gorringe 2012). As noted above, drums *are* played at Pallar gatherings but they are not so central, in part due to different strategies and partly as they lack the historical associations with drumming. Given the continued association between the *parai* and caste work X-Ray wrote to *Ezhuchi* (Manickam 2008: 21) castigating the journal for speaking of ‘*parai* artists’ and claiming that this was a ‘humiliation and insult to the memory of Dalit struggles’. He spoke of how the Dalits from 40 villages in Sivagangai District, central Tamilnadu, joined together and resolved never to beat the drum again in the 1940s. They all went to the big Hindu festival at Pattamangalam village and set their drums on fire. In a pointer to intra-group sanctions and policing, X-Ray noted how villages that had rejected the drum refused to take spouses from those that still performed (Interview, May 2012). In the village of Vanjinagaram, central Tamil Nadu, villagers had refused to play the drum since the brutal murder of Kandam – a young Dalit who fought against caste inequalities and services – in 1987. Vanjinagaram Dalits have erected a memorial stone to him and refer to him as a community deity (*Kuzhu Deivam*) or ‘the justice man’ (Fieldnotes, April 2012). Crucially, the celebration of the *parai*, from this perspective, weakens the position and resolve of those drummers still seeking to abandon this degrading caste-based task. The pointed, albeit factually incorrect, assertion that Pallars no longer play the drum is intended to highlight how it continues to be seen as humiliating.

Tamil Murasu recalled how Ravikumar was presented with an award at a *Kalai Vizha* and used the opportunity to ask ‘Is the *parai* our art form? Is it Dalit’s identity? ... It cannot be called our identity because so many people have died opposing the drum’ (Interview, May 2012). It is important to note here, that supporters of the *parai* would not disagree with many

of these arguments. Arun (2007b; 96) cites one respondent as saying: ‘we must get rid of this devilish job’. His respondents and the organisers of the Dalit art festivals, however, differentiate between drumming as a caste-task and drumming out of choice. As a Dalit activist working at the Tamilnadu Theological Seminary put it:

J: We are not compelling anyone to take up drumming. It is each individual’s choice. If someone is forcing you to do it then don’t.

Author: But you are legitimising drumming ...

J: No way. You have not understood. This is totally different. We too broke *paraïs* in the past and abandoned them. Then we stopped and asked why. Now we are taking a music form that has been described as lowly by others and are re-signifying it. ...

Playing the Parai is a form of music. An art that has been characterised as demeaning by other people. Why should we listen to them? We are good at this music, we enjoy it, why not celebrate it and raise its status? (Jawahar, Personal Communication, June 2012).

Speaking to apolitical Dalits one can find plenty of support for this view. When I asked Nesamani, about the contention that *parai* music is degrading, for instance, she replied: ‘Is that what they say? But I like the rhythms and dances’ (Personal Communication, June 2012). The enthusiastic reception afforded to drummers at *Kalai Vizhas* similarly points to appreciation for the music. The key, here, may be the positionality of the respondents, and X-Ray pointed to this in reflecting on the polarised nature of the debate:

If you ask where this originated from, it was because African drums became world famous. ... Black artists now gain respect and recognition for their music and it was

decided that we need to do something similar for our people and assert that we have a separate art ... What is happening here is that those who have *not* been humiliated by this trade are thinking about it on high and acting on their ideas. Had those who had experienced this humiliation been involved, they would have understood and refrained from doing this' (Interview, May 2012).

When I mentioned that I had seen upper-caste performers playing the *parai* at a museum in Chennai he retorted: 'In Madras they do not know that this means slavery'. Tamil Murasu, who lives in a village in Madurai district, endorsed this view and felt that the activists were divorced from the harsh realities of drumming as a profession:

At funerals 'they [upper caste patrons] get drunk and go to hit the performers: "Deh, beat [the drum] like this, beat like that". They call us by caste names and hit us. At death rituals they behave atrociously towards the performers. If it is an art then why are they beating you? He [patron] is seeing you through caste eyes is he not? (Interview, May 2012).

A recent survey of 303 menial workers by the NGO Evidence (n.d), based in Madurai, found that 60 respondents were 'forced to beat the *parai*'.¹³ Shah et al (2004: 109) similarly report that Dalit are still required to play drums without pay in parts of South India. Whilst it may be an 'art' for some, in other words, it continues to be a caste service for others. Who then speaks for Dalits here? The different perspectives on the *parai* and the collision between the life-worlds of dependent and autonomous Dalits is admirably captured in Periyavan's story *Eardrum*. The central character named Chinnakuzhandai (Small Child) makes and plays the *parai* with such skill and verve that 'every stroke of his hand was a booming call to break into

dance'. Yet, once his son acquires a government job he upbraids his father: 'Do you want me to move around the village with dignity or not? If you go around playing drums any more, I will be really furious' (2012: 77). His pride and joy in making music and '*real* drums' clashes with his son's search for dignity and respect in an echo of McGilvray's (1983) work in Sri Lanka.

Discussion: War Drum or Death Rattle?

In his analysis of cultural memory and history in Dalit movements, Nagaraj (1993) describes how a Dalit elite seeks to reject all traces of a humiliating past and privileges self-identity over cultural identity. Similarly, in a Tamil context, Ramachandran and Hashim (2014) argue that the activist strand of Dalit literature focuses on oppression and victimisation. Countering this 'universalist approach' to Dalit liberation, Nagaraj describes a more communitarian project of cultural affirmation that arises out of the life-worlds and practices of Dalits rather than abstract ideals. Ganguly (2004: 61, emphasis in original) observes similar processes, noting how: 'the activist desire of a "true present" for the Dalit, a present wiped clean of *all* traces from an ignominious past, is bound to be interrupted by singularities of Dalit dwelling that *make present* the past'. The call to eschew past practices, rituals and beliefs because they are associated with untouchability, from this perspective, is problematic. Indeed, as Nagaraj (1994: 20) argues: 'the desired result of this politics of knowledge systems is to remove culture, which is also a source of power, from the definition of the Dalit being'. Ganguly's (2004) work points to the difficulties of such a radical break with the past, and Clark-Deces (2006: 266) echoes this in noting a tinge of regret amongst the professional Dalit bands who must 'embrace an uncongenial mode of sociality. They had to march without the means – the songs – to distinguish themselves from others'. Debates over the status of the *parai* in contemporary Tamil Nadu, thus, are essentially about the contours of Dalit identity in which,

to quote Sikka (2012: 55): ‘the historical memory of power relations between communities shapes their decisions about this past and future identity’.

In the Dalit Arts Festivals there is a frequent distinction made between the *sapparai* (death drum) and *porparai* (war drum), with the assertion being that the events are celebrating the instrument of rebellion and liberty rather than the tool of oppression (Fieldnotes, March 2012; cf. Arun 2007a and b). The distinction in itself, however, suggests that the significance and meaning of the *parai* varies according to ones’ location, politics and perspective. That the drum is now increasingly associated with resistance and the celebration of a previously despised folk-art should not blind us to the fact that it is still predominantly Dalits who play the drum and that many in rural Tamil Nadu are still expected to play at funerals and other social rituals. Though compulsion these days is increasingly economic rather than social, elderly Dalits may still be tied into unequal social relations (Lillelund 2009), and refusal to play at funerals may lead to exclusion as in Thirupuvanam above (Kumar 2015).

Furthermore, following Guru (2009: 219), the marginal nature of the *parai* is evident in the humiliating use of the prefix in the term ‘Dalit art’. Such prefixes, Guru argues, cement the association between caste and the practice or position in question.

Guru (2009: 223), however, also notes that Dalit cultural struggles ‘have deployed certain powerful modes of transvaluation in order to produce counter rejection through re-signification of what was previously stigmatised’. For all the anti-drum camp’s anger and assertion that little has changed, it is clear that the *parai* no longer simply connotes subordination. Increasingly, it is played on auspicious occasions such as weddings and festivals, it is played by choice, often attracts a reasonable wage, and is frequently played for Dalits themselves rather than being reserved for the validation of upper-caste status. Where it

used to mean death, therefore, now it heralds a protest or celebration as often as it marks someone's passing. Indeed, Karthikeyan (2013) reports on a folk-art team led by Manimaran and Maghizhini in Chennai who have performed at Brahmin weddings in Mylapore and taught drumming in schools.¹⁴ More significantly, the *parai* recently entered the Tamil common syllabus for Social Science in schools as one of the ancient instruments of Tamil Nadu.¹⁵ The *parai*, in other words, is breaking out of the bounds of caste.

Whilst this cannot obscure the fact that Dalits across Tamil Nadu continue to face discrimination, ostracism and violence and that some Dalit drummers are still expected to perform at funerals, it is clear that there has been a shift in perceptions of the *parai* and that activists have succeeded in challenging dominant codes to some extent (Melucci 1996). In her analysis of the failure of a 'secular and revolutionary Dalit Buddhist narrative' to eradicate *bhakti* practices, Ganguly (2004: 61) argues that what the converts are doing is 'to partake of a range of practices from their habitus – practices sedimented over time and ones they are oriented to in their day-to-day living'. Like Nagaraj (1993, 1994) she is pointing to the significance of cultural memory and the difficulty of erasing all continuities with the past from contemporary identities. Whilst agreeing with the thrust of Ganguly's argument, this paper suggests that the emphasis on 'habitus' – the pre-reflexive embodiment of dispositions that tends to reproduce the social context from which it originates – is misplaced. The Dalit activists in this paper are drawing on long-established cultural repertoires, but are doing so in ways that radically transform them. The drumming by contemporary funeral bands, as Clark-Deces (2006) poignantly shows, is completely different to that of the past. Indeed, from this perspective, the schism between activists presented by Nagaraj (1993) is less apparent in the Tamil context. Here, both advocates and opponents of drumming are fighting for the same goals, though they disagree over the means. Both seek an end to the humiliations of caste and

seek to articulate a positive Dalit identity that is free from hierarchy. Neither camp, thus, celebrates sub-Dalit caste identity, though they may call for mobilisation on that basis to contest inequalities. Rather, they are seeking new bases on which to construct a meaningful identity for Dalits in contemporary Tamil Nadu. Of necessity, these efforts entail negotiating with cultural memories of humiliation and subordination and the symbols associated with that. If the very sound of the *parai* connotes degradation then there can be no compromise, but given the underlying concerns of both approaches for dignity and autonomy, perhaps the growing acceptance and celebration of the *parai* in mainstream Tamil culture will finally enable it to escape its negative connotations and allow both camps to forge an anti-caste identity. If both strands of the Dalit movement can unite in struggles against continuing practices of untouchability, then perhaps Maghizhini's dream of eradicating caste rather than the *parai* can be realised (Karthikeyan 2013) and casteism can finally be drummed out.

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¹ Lillelund (2009) notes how the drums were also made from goat-skin in Tranqbar. This suggests that it is the uses of the drum and their association with funerals that occasions stigma rather than the material from which it is manufactured.

² For more on this see the Dalit Resource Centre webpage: http://www.drccts.com/DRC_html/Dalit_Arts.htm. Accessed on 26 November 2013.

³ The Dalit Resource Centre, an arm of the Tamilnadu Theological Seminary was founded in 1989 and collates archival material related to Dalits, publishes reports, encourages research and promotes cultural activities. It is a well-known resource centre for those working on Dalit issues.

⁴ For an excellent recent study comparing Dalits' experiences of caste in rural and urban areas see Carswell and De Neve (2014). Whilst they do not deal with caste tasks here, they note how forms of untouchability and casteism persist in village contexts where Dalits are more dependent.

⁵ See: http://www.drccts.com/DRC_html/Thappu_Artistes_Union.htm. Accessed on 27 November 2013.

⁶ Venkatesh Athreya, V and R. Chandra, R, 'The Drumbeats of Oppression', *Frontline* 17(12): <http://www.hindu.com/fline/fl1712/17121030.htm>. Accessed on 27 November 2013.

⁷ I am grateful to one of the anonymous referees for raising this issue.

⁸ To listen to this powerful song see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MfMFsXnCsHQ>. Accessed on 04 December 2013.

⁹ Listen to tracks from this album here: <http://paulfield.bandcamp.com/album/the-dalit-drum-2>. Accessed on 26 November 2013.

¹⁰ See a report on the Durban event here: <http://www.hrschool.org/doc/mainfile.php/lesson18/91/>. Accessed on 26 November 2013.

¹¹ D. Karthikeyan, 'Dalit Cultural Festival lacks zest', *The Hindu* 19 March 2012: <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-tamilnadu/dalit-cultural-festival-lacks-zest/article3011120.ece> Accessed on 05 December 2013.

¹² For a typical event celebrating Thirumavalavan's birthday:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k0S7bh_gN9M Also see *Tamilar, Tamilar* on <http://thirumavalavansongs.wordpress.com/>. Both accessed on 05 December 2013.

¹³ See: http://evidence.org.in/ViolationsinMenialJobs_StudyReport.pdf Accessed on 27 November 2013.

¹⁴ See D. Karthikeyan, 'Drummer Woman makes it big', *The Hindu* 04 March 2013:

<http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Madurai/drummerwoman-makes-it-big/article4471623.ece> Accessed on 04 December 2013. Maghizhini recently made her debut in the Tamil film industry with the hit song *Soi Soi* - featuring *parai* music - in the Prabhu Solomon film *Kumki* (Tame Elephant, 2012). Listen to the song here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9YGHBNIifEk> Accessed on 27 November 2013.

¹⁵ See the syllabus outline here: www.samacheerkalvi.in/final-syllabus/Social-Science_eng.pdf (Accessed 05 February 2015). For an indication of its impact in schools see Vinodh Devarajan's 2012 film on the *parai* for Anna University, Chennai: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xYFOWAWOYZk> (Accessed 5 February 2015).

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